



## HOW DO ROMANIAN TEACHERS CAPITALIZE THE EXPERIENCE OF CURRICULUM INTEGRATION GAINED THROUGH PARTICIPATION IN ETWINNING PROJECT?

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**Abstract:** The integrated curriculum has been and still remains one of the major directions of interest in contemporary education. The present study aims at analyzing the opinion of a sample of 108 teachers, which are part of an eTwinning community regarding: a) their availability to participate in eTwinning projects; b) the ways of capitalizing the results of their participation in eTwinning projects; c) the value given to integrated approaches of curriculum content; d) the changes in teaching activities after their participation in eTwinning projects, including difficulties in the implementation of project results. An online questionnaire was the instrument of investigation. The main results of teacher participation in eTwinning projects, as they were mentioned by subjects, could be found in their teaching: the use of ICT in teaching and learning, the foundation of learning process on socio-constructivism, the multiplication of interdisciplinary connections, the enhancing of the student centered learning, the acquisition of key skills, the introduce of new methods and strategies.

**Key words:** eTwinning, teaching, survey, curriculum, interdisciplinary, integrated approach

### 1. Introduction

eTwinning is one of the "fundamental component of the European Commission's eLearning program, part of the Erasmus+, EU Programme for Education, Training, Youth and Sport, 2014" ([http://www.etwinning.net/ro/pub/discover/what\\_is\\_etwinning.htm](http://www.etwinning.net/ro/pub/discover/what_is_etwinning.htm) ).

The main element is the eTwinning portal (etwinning.net) available in 25 languages, having a new interface since 2013. The eTwinning portal is a place where teachers can register, search for partners (schools and other institutions), and consult professional publications in eTwinning. It should be noted that initially eTwinning functioned as a platform designed for developing projects, but due to synchronous (chat) and asynchronous (email) communication tools eTwinning became a slight tinge of social network. Most eTwinners use eTwinning Desktop as a way to start the day, to get informed, to find the latest news in the domain, to post and track events in European educational environment.

eTwinning can be considered a model of good practice from the point of view of promoting and encouraging innovative initiatives in education and as a financial management of all activities that take place here. Thus, unlike other Erasmus+ programs, eTwinning facilitates communication between partners, projects achievement and assessment, request and receive other colleagues support, promoting the program through volunteering.

The projects developed on the eTwinning platform promote integrated approaches, on the one hand due to recognized valences of these approaches, and on the other hand due to existing differences in the school curriculum of eTwinners countries.

### 2. Curriculum integration

Human knowledge is rapidly and exponentially growing, and new areas of research are constantly arising. Under these circumstances the school can not follow the progress of knowledge. Introducing

new school subjects does represent an efficient solution. It is necessary to open the fundamental disciplines towards multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary and crosscurricular approaches.

Having their foundation on Gestalt psychology (Esprivalo Harell, 2010) the curricular integration (integrated curriculum) is mentioned in the Directives of the European Commission since 2000 (Lisbon). It is important to note that Dewey and Kilpatrick suggested the necessity of integration in the early century (Loepp, 1999, quoting Vars, 1991).

According to Vars, the real challenge addressed to curriculum conceptors and teachers is to design a curriculum that aims at taking into consideration both learners and society needs. Therefore, it seems natural that the definition of integrated curriculum has been and remains a challenge for researchers: "over the last hundred years, theorists offered three basic categories for interdisciplinary work; they defined the categories although the categories had often different names. Integration seemed to be a matter of degree and method." (Badley, 2009; Drake & Burns, 2004).

Drake & Burns (2004) note that curriculum integration is based on motivations and practice needs of teachers concerned about the active and effective involvement of their students in the learning process. In addition, Badley (2009, p.115) explains: "Integration involves curriculum or instruction that combines, draws upon or encourages students to see connections between the contents of two or more academic disciplines".

Emphasizing that the curriculum integration should not be "an end in it self but a means for accomplishing basic educational goals" Brophy and Alleman (1991) report some negative effects of attempts to force the integration of content or activities in social studies: the students' lack of interest for the proposed integrated theme/topic; proposing topics that exceed students understandings; time consuming; the lack of natural correlations in the topic or ill conceived integration ideas etc. The solution to avoid these effects is provided by Bean (1995) who says: "the central focus of curriculum integration is the search for self-and social meaning". This meaning occurs in the context of the dissolution of boundaries between school subjects and confronting students with learning experiences: a) significant for them (by relating the learning process with their life experience, with their needs and interests); b) important to society. (Bean, 1995; Brophy & Alleman, 1991)

Corroborating the opinions of Badley (2009), Bean (1995), Brophy & Alleman (1991), Drake & Burns (2004) and Vars (1991) we define the integrated curriculum as a curriculum that exploit the multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and cross curricular perspectives to respond to the needs of both students and society and to foster the accomplishment of major goals in each subject area.

Studies on integrated curriculum were made in all European countries (Beane, 1995, Drake & Burns, 2004; Esprivalo Harell, 2010; Fogarty, 2009; Vars, 1991) but in Romania concrete measures have been initiated only in recent years, simultaneously with the introduction of preparatory class (2012). In April 2013 new curricula for first and second grades were approved, continuing the preparatory class reform programme in 2012. An analysis of the needs of teachers regarding integrated curriculum and professional development was made by Ministry of Education and Research in partnership with Softwin under the POSDRU 63113: "Interdisciplinary learning activities for developing key skills to primary school children - Blended learning training program for primary school teachers" and it was materialized in ICOS platform. (Csorba et al. 2013)

### 3. eTwinning and curriculum integration

According to the above considerations the eTwinning project promotes a model of "common European curriculum" that is horizontally curricular integrated (different subject areas), vertical (same curricular area) or crosscurricular (theme that does not belong to existing disciplines). The decision on the degree of the integration is taken by the teacher following the discussions with the students. Theme is mutually agreed as well the subject areas involved. Curricular integration involves choosing a type of approach (on which level of curricular integration project is situated: mono, multi, inter, cross - disciplinary), ways of integration (insertion, harmonization, correlation, intersection, fusion), the degree of integration (partially, totally), the integration (intracurricular or extracurricular). (Ciolan, 2008)

The benefits of using eTwinning for personal and professional development of teachers have also become the subject of some analysis in Romania. The most recent studies belong to Institute of Education Sciences (ISE) and Centre for Innovation in Education (TEHNE). (Istrate et al., 2013).

Crisan (2013) refers to a research focused on Romanian teachers' experiences in eTwinning projects. ([http://padi.psiedu.ubbcluj.ro/adn/article\\_6\\_4\\_3.pdf](http://padi.psiedu.ubbcluj.ro/adn/article_6_4_3.pdf)). The paper presents the subjects responses concerning: a) the changes on their teaching activities arising from participation in eTwinning program and b) the limits and difficulties in implementing outcomes achieved from collaborative eTwinning projects in their teaching. Concerning the first problem the subjects specify few methodological aspects such are: the use of ICT in teaching (78% subjects) and learning (73% subjects), the foundation learning process on socioconstructivism (78% subjects) the enhancing attention on student-centering; the key skills acquisition (75% subjects) and the introducing new methods and strategies (73% subjects). Referring to curriculum integration issue, a large percentage of respondents (77%) appreciates the development of interdisciplinary connections.

Regarding the limits of developing the knowledge acquired in eTwinning projects, most respondents (62%) invokes specific features of Romanian curriculum, mainly monodisciplinary in secondary but still promoting multi- and interdisciplinary connections in primary, currently preparatory class and first grade. Therefore, to comply with the curricula, teachers participating in eTwinning show that it is required to implement the interdisciplinary subjects developed in eTwinning projects through extracurricular activities conducted during their free time.

The mentioned researches are important for the following reasons:

- (i) the interest for and the skills on developing integrated curriculum acquired by teachers by the participation on eTwinning projects has not been the subject of study until now;
- (ii) eTwinning community is increasing (exceeding the limit of 200 000 teachers from all over Europe, more than 12 000 being Romanian);
- (iii) the contribution of this community in the development of the educational process is becoming increasingly significant (quality of projects increasing from year to year);
- (iv) integrated curriculum becoming a stronger reality both for European and Romanian education.

#### 4. Method

The present study analyzes the view of a sample of teachers participating in international collaborative eTwinning projects on:

- a) availability to participate in eTwinning projects;
- b) how to capitalize the acquisitions resulting from participation in eTwinning projects;
- c) the importance of integrated approaches for teaching.

We were also concerned about identifying the main difficulties / limitations related to the integration in classroom of acquisitions resulted by participating in collaborative eTwinning projects.

#### Research instrument

To identify teachers' opinions on the issues mentioned above a questionnaire developed for editing items in collaboration with specialists from TEHNE (Centre for Innovation in Education) and ISE (Institute of Education Sciences) was used. This research was conducted in April 2013. The questionnaire consisting of thirteen items, six demographic and seven related to research topic is available at <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1Mmte17fzO-0ds3UjGe44znL5d844UvQQxpQXdmb1FSI/viewform>.

## Subjects

The investigation included 108 teachers from 16 counties in Romania (Alba, Arges, Bistrita, Brasov, Cluj, Constanta, Galati, Giurgiu, Hunedoara, Mures, Olt, Prahova, Satu Mare, Salaj, Sibiu, Suceava) having from 1 to 5 years of experience in eTwinning and at least one project on this portal. Option to participate in our investigation was free.

## Demography

Sample subjects include teachers aged between 26 and 51+ with 1 to 5 years experience in eTwinning (Figure 2), female gender being predominant (94 %). (Figure1).

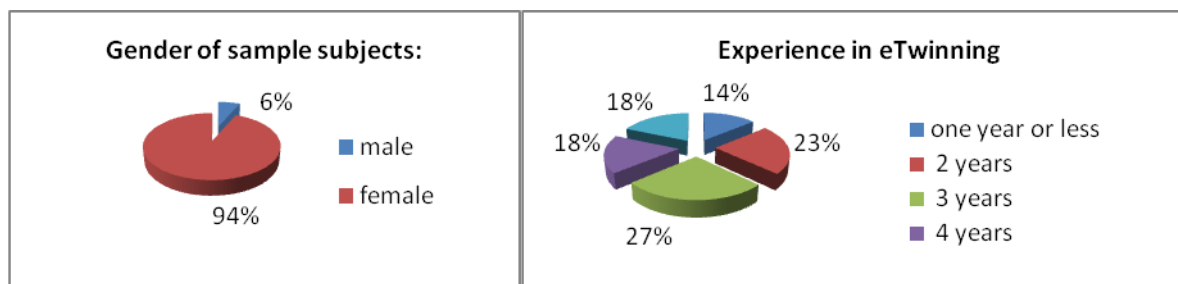


Figure 1. Gender of sample subjects

Figure 2. Experience in eTwinning

As shown in a previous study ([http://padi.psiedu.ubbcluj.ro/adn/article\\_6\\_4\\_3.pdf](http://padi.psiedu.ubbcluj.ro/adn/article_6_4_3.pdf)), beginning teachers are not involved in eTwinning collaborative projects because they usually become aware of the program after completing their studies. They find out this information from different sources, or in certain circumstances. The age categories better represented are those between 32 and 36 and 42 -46. Most of the respondents have the didactic grade I (72%).

## 5. Results

a) Availability to participate in eTwinning projects.

The results show that the high school and secondary school teachers are most interested in participating in eTwinning projects (33 % and 31 %). The preschool and primary school teachers are less interested in e-Twinning while the content of school curricula at these levels can be easily adapted to interdisciplinary or integrated approaches. ([http://padi.psiedu.ubbcluj.ro/adn/article\\_6\\_4\\_3.pdf](http://padi.psiedu.ubbcluj.ro/adn/article_6_4_3.pdf)).

b) The Figure 3 presents subjects' responses concerning the ways of capitalizing the acquisitions (activities and outcomes) achieved by participating in eTwinning projects.

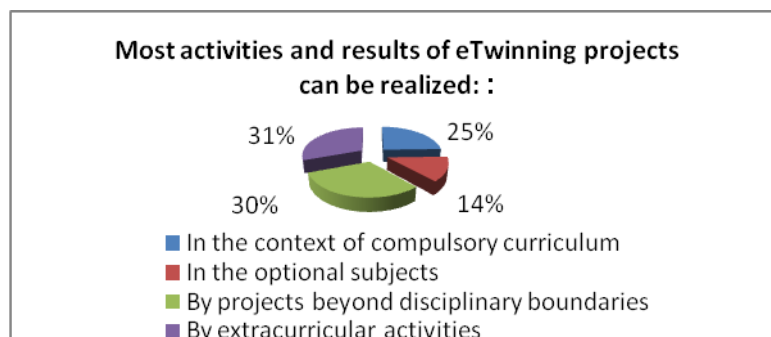


Figure 3. Ways of capitalizing the activities and outcomes of eTwinning projects ender of sample subjects

The major difficulty in implementing the acquisitions obtained through participation in eTwinning projects derive from differences between Romanian curriculum (expected outcomes, standards and

assessment) and European partner countries' curricula. Subjects' responses indicate that most activities and results of eTwinning projects can be developed by extracurricular activities, carried out in teachers and students' free time (31 % subjects), by participating in projects beyond disciplinary boundaries (30 % subjects), and in the context of compulsory curriculum (25 subjects). Only 14% of respondents believe that they can integrate these activities in optional school subjects, probably because not all teachers deliver optional curriculum.

c) Valuating the integrated approach of curricular content. (Item 1-item 9 of the questionnaire)

Answers that illustrate the importance of integrated approaches given in relation to teaching practice (teaching performance) of respondents are shown in Figure 4.

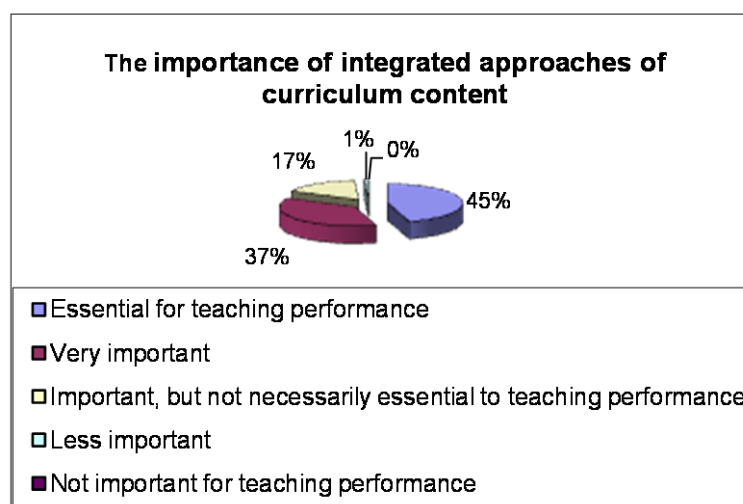


Figure 4. Respondents' opinion on the importance of integrated approaches of curriculum content

It should be noted that on the sample level of subjects, there is no teacher who considers integrated curricular approaches to be not important. Instead, the integrated approach of curricular content is considered by 82 % of the questioned teachers as essential and very important for their teaching performance. We conclude from this interest in integrated approaches that there is a real need to introduce the themes and optional disciplines in the Romanian National Curriculum. These integrated curricular approaches require cooperation between teachers of different specialties.

Some responses (17 % respondents) consider integrated approaches important but not necessarily essential to their teaching performance and a small percentage of teachers assigned a low importance of integrated approaches. These points of view can be interpreted on the basis, frequently cited by teachers, that the student with deep disciplinary knowledge will make interdisciplinary necessary connections when needed.

## 6. Discussion (The Romanian case)

Most respondents recognize the value of integrated activities developed by their participation in eTwinning projects. 38% respondents consider that integrated activities could fit quite easily and well in Romanian curriculum, in the study of different school subjects or through optional school subjects.

In these circumstances the question that arises is why Romanian teachers rarely develop integrated activities? We believe that attempts to develop integrate approaches in teaching practice fail due to monodisciplinary preparation of secondary school teachers, to their inability to develop interdisciplinary/integrate transposition of the content. To support secondary teachers to propose integrated approaches would be usefull models of good practice. It should be noticed that integrated

approaches tend to gain ground in our country in primary school, mainly because they are promoted by educational policies, but also because of the multidisciplinary training of teachers.

Another obstacle to the development of curricular integrated approach skills of teachers, who teach at any level, is the lack of collaboration within the school or teachers' community, an aspect also mentioned in the European documents. (EU, 2013; Vuorikari, 2012).

## 7. Conclusion

Project activities like eTwinning involve integrated approaches, in order to facilitate the acquisition by students of outcomes (skills, values and attitudes) considered by the learner and society useful and valuable as well as sustainable over time. Integrated Teaching through eTwinning activities changes relationships between teachers make them more open and stronger. Collaboration and information exchange are promoted. On the other hand, for the Romanian teachers the success of implemented eTwinning projects, and even participation in professional development activities promoted on this portal are often limited precisely because of their inability to collaborate. Therefore, it becomes imperative to educate teachers in the spirit of effective communication and collaboration.

Even if today we talk about curriculum integration mostly in extracurricular activities, the interest in it is also increasing in our country. Discussions with the curriculum designers are imperative in order to find a balance between monodisciplinary and integrated curriculum.

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